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The General Election: What to Look For

John C. Hulsman

Vor den Parteitag der Demokraten und der Republikaner atmet Amerika durch: Der richtige Moment, um den Zwischenstand zu nehmen im Rennen zwischen Barack Obama und John McCain. Zur Zeit favorisieren die Umfragen den schwarzen Senator, auch in einigen der traditionell eher republikanisch wählenden »red states«. Wenn es Obama gelingt, die Kernwählergruppe von Hillary Clinton, Arbeiter in »rust belt states« wie Pennsylvania, Ohio und Michigan, für sich zu gewinnen, wäre er nicht mehr zu schlagen. Als Indikator für den weiteren Verlauf des Wahlkampfes und die Chancen der beiden Kandidaten lohnt darüber hinaus der Blick auf die Umfragewerte in Virginia, Indiana und den westlichen Staaten Colorado und Montana. Der Ausgang der Wahl bleibt offen.

After the drama, color, and passion of the primary election campaign, the epic battle between Hillary and Obama and the remarkable comeback of John McCain, even political Washington is catching its collective breath. With the conventions to come in late August—early September, there is just time enough now to catch up on sleep, fund raise like crazy, and prepare for the dash to the finish line in November. This rare political lull strikes me as the perfect time to gauge what we should all be looking for as the general election campaign unwinds.

What not to look for

As the campaign begins, all the polls show Obama with a solid, if not overwhelming, lead. The Real Clear Politics numbers of July 14 have him ahead of John McCain by 3.8% nationally. Of course, America does not decide who is president by the popular vote; instead it is the state tallies that matter, as Al Gore found to his cost in 2000. According to the Real Clear numbers (www.realclearpolitics.org), excluding toss-up states,

contests where the candidates are within 5 percentage points of one another, today Obama would have around 238 electoral votes, with McCain at 163. Allowing for no toss-ups, if the election were held today Obama would win the presidency 304 electoral votes to 234, with 270 needed to elect.

A number of important states, traditionally dominated by one party, are running true to form. Texas, a Republican stronghold with 34 electoral votes, is solidly for McCain. Even more importantly, New Jersey (15 electoral votes), California (55), and New York (31) amounting to 101 electoral votes, heavily favor Obama. Even before the general campaign begins, these large but predictable states are all but sewn up.

There are also a number of states that were thought to be competitive, but have moved solidly in one candidate's direction by enough of a margin that they are less likely to be battleground states than had once been thought. Tennessee (11), despite being the home of the Gore family, seems to be heading steadily into the McCain camp. But the real surprise so far is the

number of states where Obama has established a significant lead, states once thought to be too close to call. Iowa (6), where it all started for the Illinois Senator, Oregon (7), and Washington (11), show a clear Obama lead. The two west coast states in particular have an abundance of Obama voters: young, well-educated, Starbucks drinking, Volvo driving types, who have been a mainstay of the Senator's campaign.

But three other states, long thought toss-ups, seem trending toward Obama. Wisconsin (10), Minnesota (10), and the huge prize of Pennsylvania (21), are heading his way. Pennsylvania is especially important. Despite targeting the Keystone state in 2000 and 2004, the fabled Republican political machine of Karl Rove came up just short both times. This year it was assumed it would again be ripe for the plucking, as Pennsylvania is full of the blue-collar, lower-income Democrats with whom Obama had such a hard time during the latter stages of the primary, Reagan Democrats hurt by the new economy who gravitated in droves toward Hillary Clinton. Despite this, Obama has opened up a solid lead here over McCain. If Obama is able to capture the blue-collar Clinton constituency here and in other rust belt states such as Ohio and Michigan, its game over for John McCain.

True Battleground States: States That Shouldn't Be in Play ... And Are

So here are the states to really watch, as they will determine the winner of the general election. The first category includes states that ought not to be in play, but are. In each case one candidate should have locked the state up, but has failed to do so, creating an opportunity for the underdog.

For Obama, Michigan amounts to a possible Achilles heel. Despite being in a mini-depression and missing out on the economic boom of the Clinton years, despite being one of the most heavily unionized states in the country, polling suggests that Obama is only ahead

of McCain by 2.2% here. During the primary season, when Clinton won the state, Obama hedged on his commitment to NAFTA, which is a totemic symbol to many in Michigan of the siphoning away of American jobs overseas. Since winning the nomination, Obama has crept back to a more free trade position, a flip flop unlikely to endear him to Michigan voters. This, coupled with the Democratic Party's near-suicidal primary rules, which in the end excluded the Michigan contest from mattering in the nomination process, and an unpopular Democratic governor, spells opportunity for John McCain to scoop up Michigan's 17 electoral votes. If he manages to do so, Obama's solid lead in the Electoral College will dwindle, creating a much closer race. An Obama win robs McCain of one his few opportunities to overturn the math moving in his rival's favor.

What is Obama doing in Virginia, where he is a hair's breadth behind in taking the cradle of the confederacy? The answer lies in changing demographics: today's Virginia is not your father's Virginia. A huge influx of government workers (predictably Democratic Party supporters) into the northern part of the state has steadily whittled down Republican majorities in what used to be one of the safest Republican states. The last time the GOP lost Virginia was during the Goldwater massacre of 1964. Former Governor Mark Warner, now handily ahead in the race for Virginia's open Senate seat, popular Democratic Senator Jim Webb, and popular Governor Tim Kaine, an early Obama supporter, have all been mentioned as possible vice presidential picks for Obama, as they could deliver him an improbable victory here. The bad news is that both Warner and Webb have very publicly made it clear that they do not want the job. At present, McCain is ahead in Virginia by a miniscule 0.7%. Simply put, a loss here for McCain, with the state's 13 electoral votes at stake, and its over.

Indiana is another traditionally Republican-leaning state that John McCain has been unable to safely put into his column. According to the latest polls, Obama actually leads here by a razor-thin 0.5%. Indiana has always

been a curious mix of cornfields and heavy industry, of farmland and tough suburbs of Chicago. With Obama's Illinois just next door, Indianans have been saturated by media coverage of their almost home-state Senator. Tough cities such as Gary play to the Senator's electoral strengths. McCain must find a way to mobilize the conservative farm vote, predictably Republican, or Indiana's critical 11 electoral votes will be lost for him.

The Changing West

Although as an Arizonan, John McCain is himself a Westerner, these are not good times for the party on the other side of the Mississippi River. While the plains, mountain, and desert states still have comparatively few people, and thus a small number of electoral votes, they have been lock-step Republican states for the past generation. Any erosion from this position of dominance can only help the Democratic Party, so strong on both the coasts.

Colorado, with 9 electoral votes, has been on the Democratic Party wish list for some time. Its breathtaking beauty has led to an influx of people from the west coast, a far more predictably Democratic Party voting core. This, coupled with strong support in college towns such as Boulder and among the many environmentalists in the state, have transmogrified Colorado from Republican bastion into swing state. Obama is ahead here by 5.3%, verging on pulling away. A victory for the Democrats here, one looking increasingly likely, changes the static presidential map of 2000 and 2004, forcing McCain to win a state that George Bush and Karl Rove did not. Given the present political climate, that is hard to see happening.

The immense and beautiful state of Montana may only have 3 electoral votes, but I cannot believe that I am adding it to the list. It is like the proverbial canary in the mine shaft—if this sure thing goes, for McCain its completely over. At present the Arizona Senator is only ahead by 3.7%, nothing compared with George

Bush's overwhelming twenty-plus point victories in 2000 and 2004. Obama's stance in support of the recent Supreme Court ruling affirming the right to bear arms can only help him here, in a state renowned for its western ethos, and hunters. Likewise, the Bush administration's heavy-handed clampdown on civil liberties has not played well out west, where Republicans are far more libertarian than back east. An environmentally friendly, pro-gun rights, critic of the federal government plays to the feelings of many disaffected western Republicans. Any pick up out west for Obama would cripple a Republican Party used to taking Westerners for granted.

Our old friends, Florida and Ohio

Given their electoral size and variable voting patterns, Florida (27) and Ohio (20) remain absolutely central as to who will be the next president. George Bush's victory in both states was critical to his overall triumphs in 2000 and 2004, a loss in any one these contests would have doomed his campaign. Given the present electoral math, for John McCain to have a real chance to pull an upset, he must find a way to win them both.

McCain is narrowly ahead in Florida, by 2.2 percent. For Obama, paradoxically, this is not a bad result, considering the electoral debacle over Florida in the Democratic Primary, and the fact that Hillary Clinton was more popular here. Charlie Crist, the popular Republican Governor, shows up on all short lists for McCain's vice president, as it is hoped he would secure the state. However, with an ever-increasing number of retirees from New York and other Democratic bastions, and with more Hispanics in the state coming from places other than Cuba, who are likely Democratic voters, Obama certainly has a chance here. If McCain loses here, turn out the lights.

As with Pennsylvania, Obama's much-noticed problem connecting with blue-collar Democrats does not seem to be hurting him all that much against Senator Mc-

Cain; he is ahead by an almost-comfortable 4.5% in Ohio. To call Ohio the perfect bell-weather state for American presidential politics is entirely accurate. Only once in the twentieth century did the Buckeye state vote for a candidate who did not go on to be president; amazingly every single Republican candidate who did win the general election in the past hundred years also won Ohio.

Demographically, the state is almost a perfect microcosm of America, with a rural, small-town heartland of farmers wedded to the Republican Party, standing in contrast with urban centers such as Cleveland, long Democratic bastions. As with Pennsylvania and Michigan, Ohio has been mired in a mini-depression, wherein manufacturing jobs have left forever. This is the America of the Bruce Springsteen song: patriotic, bewildered by globalization, conservative socially if liberal economically, wanting a decent shake and a fair chance. Neither an elitist-sounding Obama nor a tough love free trader like McCain have connected with

Ohio's voters. The ability to do so may, as has proven true so often, well swing the campaign.

So as you sink into your newspaper over an idyllic European August, know that, in America, everything is still to play for. Obama is ahead, but as we have seen during this amazing, maddening, remarkable, topsy-turvy campaign so far, there are still a lot of bends left in our journey. Next stop, the conventions.



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